DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 909 FL 025 923

AUTHOR Bellomo, Tom S.
TITLE Etymology and Vocabulary Development for the L2 College Student: Equal Relevance for Latin-Based and Non Latin-Based Foreign Students.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Community Colleges; Comparative Analysis; Contrastive Linguistics; *English (Second Language); *Etymology; *Foreign Students; Language Research; *Romance Languages; Two Year College Students; Two Year Colleges; *Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether the use of etymology as an instructional technique for vocabulary development in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction is equally effective for students from Romance and other language backgrounds. Subjects were 20 community college ESL students in two cohorts. Pre- and posttests assessed etymological knowledge of English vocabulary, including root synonyms and prefixes at the beginning and end of the semester. In the interim, students were instructed in English vocabulary using an etymological approach. Results indicate that while the students of Latin-based language backgrounds performed better on the pretest, the highest posttest scores were obtained by students of non-Latin-based language backgrounds, suggesting that students of Latin-based backgrounds do not have an advantage over others in this approach to English vocabulary learning. (Contains 13 references.) (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 432 909

Etymology and vocabulary development for the L2 college student:

Equal relevance for Latin-based and non Latin-based foreign students.

Tom S. Bellomo

University of Central Florida

Summer 1999

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Tom S. Bellomo
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

FL025973

I. INTRODUCTON

Foreign Students are being denied access to accredited college programs due to their inability to pass an entrance exam, specifically, the reading and writing components. One particular college had instituted an ESOL college prep writing course targeted exclusively for the L2 student, though such a class had not been developed for reading. When L2 students began doing poorly in the heterogeneous reading class, a proposal was made to research and develop a separate ESOL college prep reading class. Research pointed to schema theory (Chen & Graves, 1995; Steffensen, Joag-dev & Anderson, 1990) and vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 1990) as major components peculiar to the L2 learners' needs. Of particular interest to course development was the question: "how can vocabulary acquisition be ESOL specific?" which in turn pointed to etymology. With nearly 50% of the English language being derived from Latin-based words and many others derived from Greek (Smith, 1995), etymology was chosen as a word-attack strategy which focused primarily on Latin-based [LB] vocabulary. It was at this point that course development was challenged when colleagues disparaged the use of etymology, claiming that the use of [LB] word parts would pose a disadvantage to those whose native language was non Latin-based [NLB]. Their rationale suggests that French, Italian, Spanish and other Romance languages are derived from Latin; therefore, the [LB] student's vocabulary would proximate the target roots, affixes and vocabulary

An experiment was devised in hope of offering empirical evidence demonstrating the following hypothesis: The use of etymology is an efficacious word attack strategy regardless of the student's original language background. Though Latin-based students will have an initial advantage due to their vocabulary schema (cognates) as evidenced by a pretest, knowledge gained through direct instruction will ultimately yield relatively equal results, as evidenced by a

posttest. This would infer that etymology as a word attack skill does not unduly favor one population over another.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recently there has been an increased awareness of the role of vocabulary acquisition with regard to the foreign learner (Zimmerman, 1997). However, sources were scarce once one factored in the use of etymology and its comparative effect among different language groups. Contemporary studies in reading and L2 vocabulary acquisition often cite the work of Michael West (1953). His work is highly relevant to reading and second language acquisition; providing a background of his work is beneficial since his word list is still in use today.

In October of 1934, a conference sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation was held in New York City to discuss the possible use of English as a world language. It was agreed that in order to expedite the learning of English, the language student would benefit most by becoming familiar with those words most commonly encountered in text. In 1939 Michael West was commissioned to revise the 1936 *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection*. The onset of World War II delayed this task, but by 1953 he had assembled "A General Service List of English Words", comprising the 2,000 most frequently used words found in English text. In order to accomplish this task, he compiled a running text of five million words taken from a broad selection of reading material; words were then tabulated on the basis of frequency.

Nation and Newton (1997) stated that this list "account[s] for at least 85% of the words on any page of any book no matter what the subject matter.... Focusing learners' attention on the high-frequency words of the language gives a very good return for the learning effort" (p.238). These words should be learned to the point of automaticity (Coady & Huckin, 1997). Jim

Coady, graduate chair of the department of Linguistics at Ohio University, suggests that the General Service List should not be a subject of direct teaching, but is best learned incidentally through students' repeated exposure to text. He recommends that students be immersed in low-level text of their choice and interest in order to acquire these sight words (personal communication, March 25, 1999). Breland (1994) and other contemporary researchers cited West's work as a breakthrough and still highly relevant, though it was assembled nearly 50 years ago. Where researchers showed concern, however, was in the inclusion of some items which are no longer used as frequently today, and conversely, other words which are popular today and were not being used or used as often at the time of the compilation. The example of "racism" was cited, which is not on West's list, yet through heightened awareness during the 1960's it has since become a high frequency word. In a personal review of the text it should also be pointed out that this list was published in England; as a result, an occasional word (i.e. "smite") occurs which would not be relevant to the language student studying in the United States. A less problematic point to consider would be the variant spelling of British words.

Subsequent to West's work was the formation of the University List (Nation, 1990), a list of 800 additional words which was conceived under the same premise but incorporated words one would find in collegiate texts. This "academic language" accounts for an additional 8% of frequently encountered vocabulary; hence this composite list of 2,800 words will yield the reader an understanding of about 93% of the vocabulary found in almost any text. Another 2,000 words of the technical nature will yield a further 3% of the most commonly read vocabulary, but it is recommended that these words, which are course specific, be reserved for study within the various content areas. The remaining 4% of all English words make up an enormous 120,000+ vocabulary items. These are low-frequency items, which coupled with their extensive number,

make it impractical to learn by direct teaching. Instead, various word attack skills should be employed to derive meaning from these unknown words. To summarize, foreign students should first concentrate on high frequency vocabulary. Once these words are adequately understood, students are now ready to learn and apply word attack strategies in order to unlock the meaning of unknown, less frequently occurring words.

Barbara McGavin (1990) created an English curriculum centered around [LB] derivatives. Students were assigned a target list of eighty common Latin roots along with rules governing word analysis, but this study was not specific to the L2 learner; in addition, her sample was a high school class, not adults, and was comprised of eighteen students. Her report, however, demonstrated a positive correlation between the use of etymology and vocabulary growth.

III. METHODOLOGY

A quasi-experimental design was produced making use of pre and posttest scores. The convenience sample comprised an ESOL community college prep reading class. The initial study utilized 11 participants from a total of 17 students. Five scores were not recorded since these students enrolled after the first week, and therefore did not take the pretest at the same time as their peers. An additional student's withdrawal at midterm fulfilled the mortality threat to validity. Of these eleven students, three were of a Latin-based language origin (two Hispanics and one French); non Latin-based languages comprised: Russian, Estonian, Turkish, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese.

The pretest was administered at the onset of the fall, 1998 semester. It was multiple choice (four answers per question) comprised of three parts: 10 questions asked students to

identify a root's synonym, 5 questions pertained to prefixes, and 15 vocabulary words. The test was collected, and students were not permitted to see their results so as not to give them an opportunity to review or study their errors, or to enhance recall of the test items. A posttest was administered twelve weeks later.

The test was replicated during the spring term of 1999; nine additional students, none of whom were [LB], comprised this second group. Furthermore, two post-posttests were administered at the end of the spring semester to the original (fall) sample to test for long-term retention.

IV. RESULTS

The numbers were manageably low; therefore, conclusions were determined by simply comparing the mean and standard deviation between the two groups.

Overall Test Results

	LATIN-BASED [LB]		**NON LATIN-BASED [NLB]**	
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
Pretest	67.67	6.8	46.18	13.53
Posttest	88.67	5.13	84.88*	15.27*

*One student, who eventually failed the class, scored unusually low on the posttest; that one score diminished the group average and skewed the SD. Without that student's posttest score, the [NLB] Mean and SD would be 87.88 and 9.29, respectively.

Individual Test Results

LATIN-BASED	Language	Pretest	Posttest	2nd Post	New
	Spanish	60	90	83	77
	Spanish	73	83	80	83
	French	70	93		
	Mean:	67.67	88.7	81.5	80
	SD:	6.8	5.1	2.12	4.24

NON LATIN-BASED	Language	Pretest	Posttest	2nd Post	New
	Russian	20	100	90	100
	Russian	47	97	100	91
	Russian	40	93	90	86
	Russian*	70	93		
	Russian*	57	90		
	Russian*	40	63		
	Finnish*	67	97		
	Estonian	30	83		
	Turkish	53	87		
	Vietnamese	50	87		
	Vietnamese*	37	73		
	Chinese	47	83		
	Chinese*	46	90		
	(Chinese)+			(67)	(40)
	Japanese/Chinese	***27***	***37***		
	Taiwanese*	57	93		
	Taiwanese*	57	90		
	Korean*	40	87		
	Mean:	46.18	84.88	86.75	79.25
	SD:	13.53	15.27	13.98	26.8

* Students from the second semester (replication)
\+ From original group; missed pretest. Her score was included because she was the only Asian to exit from the class, a population of interest to this researcher.

IV. DISCUSSION

The significantly small size of this convenience sample prohibits one from drawing strong inferences or making a firm prediction. Results, however, were in keeping with the hypothesis and should warrant further replication until a sufficient sample is derived.

What preliminary insights can be gleaned from comparing these test scores? First, as expected, the [LB] group performed better on the pretest; cognates were most likely responsible for this apparent advantage. However, once instruction began both populations were simultaneously being introduced to new course material, and they were now individually responsible for the vocabulary items being presented to them. Notice at the top of the [NLB] list,

a Russian student had the lowest score on the pretest: 20%. That same student worked conscientiously and diligently throughout the semester and subsequently had the only perfect posttest score of all the students. In fact, the three highest scores were all obtained by [NLB] students. Second, posttest averages between the two groups are very similar, and if the one student's substandard score of 37% were factored out, the average of both groups would be nearly identical: 88.7 [LB] and 87.9 [NLB]. Third, the far right columns ("2nd Post" & "New") show results from two posttests administered five months after students had exited the program. These were administered only to those who had passed a state standardized test at the end of the semester. Of the nine students that had passed, six of them were available to take these *second* posttests. The same pre/posttest that they had taken before was administered so that their scores could be compared with the original test. In addition, a secondary, *new* test was introduced in order to control for test familiarity. Mean score comparison between the [LB] and [NLB] groups show little variation, certainly nothing definitively in favor of the [LB] student. The long-term retention test ("New", far right column) does, however, reveal a weakness in the Asian student's recall—and the reason for the extremely high standard deviation of the [NLB] group.

To recapitulate: near equivalent scores in the posttest—with [NLB] students obtaining the top three scores—suggests that [LB] students do not have an advantage over [NLB] students when learning vocabulary by etymology. The long-term retention test appears to confirm these results. The substandard scores obtained by the lone Asian student in the post-posttests appear to demonstrate that vocabulary acquisition alone does not adequately address the reading comprehension needs of the L2 Asian student. Implications derived from a single sample cannot warrant justification to any claim; therefore, conclusions should be reserved until a sufficient number has been amassed. Notwithstanding, poor results obtained by Asians on the state-

mandated reading comprehension test coupled with good results on their posttest and class vocabulary tests seems to point to an interference independent of vocabulary acquisition. Subsequent research pointed to orthography (Koda, 1997) and schema/cultural literacy (Singhal, 1998) as additional points to consider when assisting Asian students with reading comprehension.

Conclusion

Empirical research and self-report surveys have borne out that vocabulary acquisition is one of the more important needs of the foreign adult student learning to read English. This research paper has taken a first step in demonstrating that etymology may be a viable word attack strategy useful for a college level, heterogeneous ESOL reading class, irrespective of a student's L1.

Replication of this experiment is encouraged in order to provide a sufficient sample to justify claims mentioned in this paper's discussion. Should future studies confirm near equivalent posttest scores between [LB] and [NLB] students, the use of etymology should be encouraged as an effective means of increasing student's vocabulary and one method that would be appropriate to use in a diversely populated ESOL class.

Questions to guide further research would include:

- How do Asian thought processes differ from western thought?
- Does Asian orthography interfere with long-term vocabulary retention?
- How can the reading needs of the Asian population best be met?

References

Breland, M. H. (1994). The college board vocabulary study. College board report no. 94-4. ERIC Document reproduction services no. ED382928.

Chen, H. -S., Graves, M. (1995). Effects of previewing and providing background knowledge. TESOL QUARTERLY, 29, 663-682.

Coady, J. (1997). L2 Vocabulary acquisition a synthesis of the research. In M. H. Long & J. C. Richards (Series Eds.) & J. Coady & T. Huckin (Vol. Eds.), Second language vocabulary acquisition. The Cambridge applied linguistics series. (pp. 273-290). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Koda, K. (1997). Teaching vocabulary. In M. H. Long & J. C. Richards (Series Eds.) & J. Coady & T. Huckin (Vol. Eds.), Second language vocabulary acquisition. The Cambridge applied linguistics series. (pp. 35-52). New York: Cambridge University Press.

McGavin, B. (1990). Augmenting language analysis skills through Graeco/Latin derivatives studies. (microfiche: no.: ED324686).

Nation, I. S. P. (1990). Teaching & learning vocabulary. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Nation, P., Newton, J. (1997). Teaching vocabulary. In M. H. Long & J. C. Richards (Series Eds.) & J. Coady & T. Huckin (Vol. Eds.), Second language vocabulary acquisition. The Cambridge applied linguistics series. (pp. 238-254). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pierson, H. D. (1989). Using etymology in the classroom. ELT Journal, 43, 57-63.

Singhal, M. (1998). A comparison of L1 and L2 reading: Cultural differences and schema. The Internet TESL Journal [On-line], October.

Smith, E. L. (1995). Contemporary vocabulary. (4th ed.). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Steffensen, M. S., Joag-Dev, C., & Anderson, R. C. (1990). Reading Research Quarterly, 15, 10-29.

West, M. (1953). A general service list of English words. (new impression: 1980). London: Longman Group.

Zimmerman, C. B. (1997). Do reading and interactive vocabulary instruction make a difference? An empirical study. TESOL QUARTERLY, 31, 121-138.